

How to get up a Christmas Entertainment

by David Belasco



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NO better selection for a Christmas evening's entertainment could be made than an amateur dramatic performance. It affords not only amusement to a large circle of friends, but entertainment and pleasure to the active participants in preparing for the event. It does not necessarily follow that in order to produce a play one must have recourse to professional aid. It is surprising what good results and what really excellent performances can be obtained with amateur talent. The task is not onerous, and the rehearsals can be exceedingly jolly, so that it will be considered a pleasant relaxation and assume the gaiety of a social gathering.

I have been asked to give some suggestions which will be of aid to anyone desirous of promoting one of these amateur affairs. I shall take it for granted in this article that the entire production will be conducted by those who have never had any theatrical experience. The suggestions offered are given in a general way, but are specific enough to cover the ground.

The first thing to be considered is the selection of a play. This is rather an important point. Do not choose one that has a large cast of characters. The reason for this is evident. Numbers in affairs of this kind create confusion and difficulties which are hard to smooth out. The play should be of a character which will from its subject matter create interest. I would suggest that a play be selected which does not require extraordinary ability, and that is not of a melodramatic nature. To my mind the society drama is the safest proposition. There are many in this class which can be presented without a wealth of scenery. I have in mind a play like "Rosemary," "The Liars," "Tyranny of Tears," "Young Mrs. Winthrop," "The Wife," "The Charity Ball." I could name a score more, but merely mention these in order to give the reader an idea of the sort that will be found easy to produce. For the right of producing some of these plays a small fee is required. Yet there are many good ones that can be procured at a play bureau for twenty-five cents.

Having selected the play, the next thing to do is to select the cast. Here it is necessary to use good judgment and tact. Be careful to select good players who will accept the parts selected for them without demurring and will give them intelligent consideration. Nothing will cause the affair to assume a half-heartedness so much as one person who is constantly finding fault, thereby breeding dissension. If you would hope to succeed you must have harmony in your ranks. And be very careful that the players selected can, by their natural qualifications, lend themselves easily to the parts they will be called upon to portray. For example, the leading woman should be more dignified than the young lady who will assume one of the lesser roles. The gentlemen of the company should look the parts. Having selected the cast, arrangements must be made for the rehearsals.

Before the parts are handed out to each member the play should be intelligently read aloud by the appointed stage manager to the assembled company, who should pay the closest attention. After the reading the parts should be assigned and questions freely asked and discussed as to the characteristics of the parts and play. The time must be set for the next rehearsal, at which each member will read his own part, and the business of entrances, cues and positions on the stage will be taken up. Careful attention must be paid to these matters, called, in the parlance of the profession, "business." Do not attempt to memorize your part before you begin rehearsals. Wait until two or three rehearsals have passed and you begin to feel easy in the part before you tax your memory. You should know the first act the next day after you have read the first act with the company. And so on, until the entire play has been gone through.

It is not necessary to have more than fourteen rehearsals prior to the production. If you would add your little bit to the pleasure of the affair, be amenable to the rules adopted for the conducting of these rehearsals. Play close attention to your own part, and listen to the others. Always be ready to pick up your cue. Time can be saved which will hasten the work. Above all things, show consideration for your fellow players by refraining from conversation while they are speaking their lines. Bear in mind that good work on your part, and perhaps on the part of your fellow players, at the public performance is dependent upon the attention you pay to the rehearsals.

The next thing to consider is the dressing of the parts. If it is a costume play be sure that you are not guilty of an anachronism. Let the costumes that you wear be in keeping with the period of the play. The costumes of the time of Louis XIV are just as different from those worn in the period of Louis XVI or the First Consul as are the costumes of the Revolutionary or Colonial periods from those of the present. There should be unanimity in the selection of the costumes, so far as color and period are concerned, so that they will blend happily. Care should also be taken in the matter of hats and shoes, as incongruities are liable to arouse derision on the part of your audience. I would advise you, if the scenes of the play selected are laid in the past, to visit libraries and consult books of reference. Many of the histories are illustrated with prints which will be found extremely useful. If, however, the scenes are laid in the present, see that the characters are properly dressed according to the social class to which they belong. If the part represented is a character part, seek out that class in real life or counterpart, and study the dress and mannerisms.

The next thing to be considered is the stage. If it happens that a regular theater cannot be procured, your ingenuity will be taxed to overcome this handicap. A platform covering an area of as little

Great Dramatic Producer Lays Down Rules and Suggestions for Amateur Players in Holiday Theatricals.

space as twelve by fifteen feet, if more room is not obtainable, can be made to serve the purpose. If there is no platform, one can be made at a very slight expense. This should be at least three feet above the level of the main floor. A height of at least ten feet can be arranged in the nature of portieres. The scenes where merely interiors are represented can be made of domestic or some cheap colored cotton cloth. The many ways of overcoming the lack of scenery are so obvious that I need not make any further suggestions. The arrangement of lights is the one that requires attention. "Foots" are not indispensable, but when used they should be at least eighteen inches apart, with a reflector back of them, so that the light will be thrown at an angle on the stage. Tin cut in convenient strips will serve as reflectors. If the effects are to be ambitious, scenery can be produced for amateur af-

fairs by writing to any local theater, the manager of which will, I am sure, give the desired information.

In setting the stage—that is, providing it with proper furniture and decorations—care should be taken to follow the author's suggestions. He wrote the play, consequently his advice should be considered. A reading of the play will suggest what is proper and what is not. A Morris chair in a play where the central figure is some historic character of the sixteenth century would immediately attract the attention of the audience from the speaker's lines to the incongruity of the stage setting. I merely mention this as a hint. A little judgment as to such minor details will do much to insure a pleasing production.

The many little tricks and artifices used in creating effects, such as the hoofbeats of a horse, the rumbling of carriage wheels, the roar and peal of thunder, the

flash of lightning, the patter of rain, the swish of waves, the ripple of water, are comparatively easy; as are also the making of shrubbery, foliage, vines, vegetables and fruits. To create the effect of hoofbeats, all that is necessary is two coconut shells and a slab of marble; and in order to deaden the sound, so as to make it more realistic, a piece of carpet will come in good stead. A pole about ten feet in length held in a perpendicular position and pushed along the floor will give an almost perfect reproduction of the sound of an approaching or retreating carriage. Thunder effects are created by using a bass drum and a drumstick and striking a sharp blow and then four or five intermittent blows with less force. The crash of thunder, however, is best imitated by giving a sharp, quick shake to a piece of sheet iron about six feet long hung aloft. The lightning effect can be easily produced if you have electric light connections. The wires are attached to a carbon and a common blacksmith's file. By touching the point of the file to the carbon the flash is obtained. Where there are no connections the effect can be produced by means of a magnesia torch, which can be procured for a small sum from a theatrical supply house. The sound of the patter of rain is best made by rolling No. 6 shot in a shallow pan. The swish of waves can be imitated by pouring about a peck of navy beans into an ordinary sugar barrel, closing the top of the barrel and gently tipping it backward and forward.

The making of shrubbery and foliage is done with tissue paper of a proper color, thin wire and the branches of the bush or foliage you are endeavoring to create. Do not think that in making an apple tree in bloom you can use the naked branch of a cherry. Endeavor to be true to nature. The making of flowers and flower bushes is a comparatively easy matter to anyone who has knowledge of how to make paper flowers. Vegetables are made with cotton and cloth. The cloth is cut in the required shape, then stuffed with cotton, sewed up and painted the desired tint with water colors. The same rule applies to the manufacture of fruits.

The ruddy glow of a fireplace, varying from the cherry-red of the blaze to the almost dying embers, is created by means of gelatin rolls of the proper color, which must be obtained from some theatrical supply house; but lacking this, almost as good results are possible with stained glass or heavy folds of tissue paper of the color desired, but placed at a safe distance in front of the lamp. It is easy to have moonlight if you have electric lights. Three 16-candle power incandescents should be mounted in a tin pan, which is placed immediately back of the curtain and at the particular point where the moon is to be, the canvas having previously been treated with transparent paint, which is sold at any drug store.

What will form a very pleasing entertainment attendant to the production is the time and efforts consumed in "making up." It is absolutely necessary that recourse be had to grease paint in order to conform the face to the character presented. The footlights will have a deleterious effect otherwise.

To begin with, rub the face thoroughly with cold cream. If this is not obtainable vaseline can be used, or cocoa butter. The cost of a sufficient quantity at a drug store is trifling. After rubbing the face, wipe off the residue with a towel. The next operation is to lay on the flesh tint. This is a stick-paint, of which there are

fourteen tints, ranging from No. 1, the lightest, No. 14, the darkest, which is called "Japanese." The number that you should use depends upon the character and complexion required for the part you are called upon to portray. For ordinary Nos. 1, 2 and 3 are preferable for women, Nos. 4, 5 and 6 for men, the rest being decidedly character tints. After having used the flesh tints, which must be well and evenly spread, the application of cold cream being used in order to facilitate this, the shadows are next in order. The groundwork for these is laid on with a stick of light gray, which is covered with brown when a darker shadow is required. The lines are also produced in the same manner. The red for the cheeks is blended. A small dab of red is first placed on the cheeks and then blended with the fingers until the proper effect is reached. This must be done before the shadows are laid in. The whole is then covered with powder (flesh-colored preferably), which is applied with a puff. The superfluous powder may then be dusted off with a hare's foot. Next the eyelashes must be accentuated. If the character is a brunette, this should be done with black cosmetic, which, owing to its hardness, must first be heated and applied with a pencil or stick. If, however, the player is of a lighter complexion, brown is used. The eyebrows are treated in the same manner. Next come the lips. Carmine rouge mixed with vasoline will suffice. If youth is required a small speck of carmine should be put in the inside corner of each eye. If, after having finished, you find that it is necessary to lighten the color, ordinary rouge can be used advantageously. An assorted set of grease paint colors sufficient for all purposes can be purchased at almost any drug store for one dollar. Mustaches or beards can be procured ready-made. The man from whom you hire your wig can supply you with these cheaper and better than you can make them yourself. If you wish to try your hand at making them yourself, crimped hair will be found best for all purposes. The hair comes in all shades, and is applied with liquid glue or spirit gum. You will have to practice three or four times before you reach the necessary proficiency.

Colored lights are often a necessity in a play and add much to the effectiveness of a scene. Material for them may be procured at a drug store. They should be burned in a tin pan at the side of the stage, a polished reflector fitted to the pan casting the light in any desired direction.

A simple bit of naturalness often goes far toward the success of a play. Bread actually toasted at a real fire, water boiled and tea made in sight of the audiences are slight touches, but they sometimes count for more than more pretentious ones. Endeavor in your representation of any character to imagine what your own feelings would be under similar circumstances. Try to sink your identity and individuality in the part intrusted to you. If you are called upon to portray a product of the slums, remember that a concealment of the gallantry and politeness natural to you and your walks in life is necessary, and that you must bestow on your part the coarseness of its nature. Though this be but a frolic, this amateur affair, be sincere in your work, and you will find your pleasure increasing in proportion to the good work that you are doing. Above all things, be natural. That is the keynote of acting. If you are able to procure the services of a "coach," my advice to you is to follow his counsel. When you engage a coach of someone who knows more about acting than you do, consequently you should be willing to be guided by the advice offered.

